

A STRATEGY FOR AGROECOLOGY

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Sue is the chief executive of the UK Food, Farming & Countryside Commission.

'It's time to acknowledge that, at the same as working tirelessly for 1.5 degrees, we must risk-manage for 2.5 degrees. And, as we've started to see clearly in the last couple of years, more diverse and flexible systems are more resilient systems – from farms, to households, to communities, to businesses, to whole sectors.'

Here in the UK, the fragilities of the modern food system have never been more evident, as we navigate our way through a pandemic, and cope with the material reality of exiting the European Union and start to negotiate new trading relationships around the world. From supply chain logistics to staffing, in picking, processing and packing, the gaps on shop shelves bring home to us that those things we thought we could take for granted, in the affluent global north, are no longer so certain.

These are not the only crises we're dealing with in food systems; the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and diet related ill health is prompting far reaching reflection on what we really need from a sustainable food system. It is now widely acknowledged that the increasing intensification of the global food system over the last sixty years has contributed to climate breakdown and damaged the natural resources on which all life depends. Whilst economic growth has improved millions of lives, it has also altered food and farming around the world, and led to huge costs to people and planet. And even the gains made in the richest countries are now stalling, in large part due to the foods we eat and the air we breathe.

Yet the IPCC Sixth Assessment report makes it clear we are failing to grasp how serious this crisis really is. Not only will we fail to meet the 1.5 degree target in the Paris Agreement, but, in their most likely

scenario, we will exceed 2 degrees of global warming and could reach 3.5 degrees by 2080. This will be catastrophic for Earth's natural systems on which we all rely. We are already seeing the results of a changing climate in the rise of 'unprecedented' events around the world – storms and floods, heatwaves, fires, droughts and escalating extinctions.

In the face of this assessment, we need nothing less than a transformation of the whole food system, from the ground up. Literally.

As we approach COP26 in Glasgow, countries and businesses are setting out their plans to reduce their emissions and invest in a nature and climate positive future. A plethora of new initiatives has been announced – the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, the Race to Zero, the Mission Possible Platform and more... The new energy, mobilising behind the climate challenge is encouraging (and overdue!) with investments in the technologies that will set a trajectory to net zero, and the plans and finance to back them.

But it is also essential to focus on the no-regrets and eminently deliverable nature-based actions that can be taken right now – and many of these are in the food and farming sector.

In the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission's latest reports we set out how a UK transition to agroecology by 2030 is the most plausible and fair pathway to more sustainable land use, food and

farming. With the right enabling conditions in place, we find that:

- A transition to agroecology is feasible and achievable, keeping us fed, balancing trade without exporting production, and reducing diet-related ill-health.
- Emissions will be reduced by 66-77%, and this could be further improved if we account for the removal of imported deforestation via soya, reductions in food waste, and adopt the GWP* method of accounting for methane emissions.
- 1.8m hectares (10%) of current agricultural land would be released for ecosystem restoration.
- Biodiversity will be dramatically improved across all productive land by farming for more diversity in crops, grasslands and livestock and reducing synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and nutrient losses.
- A transition to agroecology works best at scale, allowing these interdependent benefits to develop in synergy across farms, communities and landscapes.

The right enabling conditions are fourfold.

Firstly, systemic problems require system-wide solutions. Aligning policies across government departments is essential, so that gains in one policy area are not undermined by actions in another. Specifically, a transition to agroecology requires: real and practical support for farmers through the new farm payment schemes, backed by knowledge and advice services; investment in diverse local food businesses and supply chains, using public procurement to start to rebalance the market; progressive trade deals which uphold high standards; frameworks for better land use decision making; and, in the UK, implementing the recommendations in the National Food Strategy, tackling the junk food cycle.

Secondly, we need aligned and co-ordinated actions by business. For too long, the food sector has worked on a price first model – cheap commodities, cheap labour, cheap hospitality, and cheap food baskets. This has externalised the true cost of food production, to be picked up by the public purse –

dealing with pollution, propping up low wages, and treating diet-related ill health, whilst the use of food banks is still spiralling. And it has locked farmers, producers and citizens into an increasingly dysfunctional system whose impacts now outweigh benefits. Healthy sustainably produced food has to be good business for everyone involved in it, with a serious commitment from food supply chains, backed by a rising regulatory baseline, to make fair and healthy, nature and climate positive food systems the norm, where the risks and rewards are more equitably shared between producers, shareholders, customers and communities.

Patient and innovative finance is the third critical component. At the moment, finance seems most attracted to the shiny new technologies that promise big results at a point in the future. Vertical farms have their place, but we can't live off basil and strawberries (though I do have a fabulous recipe for strawberry and basil soup). The finance community must start to look hard at both the serious and practical investment possibilities, and also at the potential stranded assets in the food system. For those big global agribusinesses who've cornered the markets in commodities and chemicals, the future must now become clear. Fund managers need to send unambiguous signals to businesses, and expect to see, in return, serious and workable plans for rapid transition away from these climate, nature and health damaging products.

Instead, the resources must flow to where the real work is needed; investing in a fair and resilient food system that makes sure that healthy, sustainably produced food is easily available to everyone everywhere; that provides a fair return and good work for all in the supply chain. This means investing in practices that improve soil health and increase soil carbon, avoiding bare soil and protecting soil structures, incorporating ruminants into rotations for natural fertility, introducing herbal leys instead of grassland monocultures, incorporating trees and hedges into farmed landscapes, for food, fuel, shelter, and nature, eliminating synthetic chemicals and allowing

natural processes to flourish – ‘when we farm in harmony with nature, nature comes to help us.’ These readily achievable and effective methods are available right now, to help sequester carbon, recover nature, increase farm profitability, and improve health and wellbeing. For the UK, or any country, it means taking responsibility for growing more of the healthy and sustainable foods we need, and are ecologically suited to grow in our landscapes, for a more resilient and secure food future.

Finally, it's time to acknowledge that, at the same as working tirelessly for 1.5 degrees, we must risk-manage for 2.5 degrees, by informing and resourcing communities to understand and adapt to the inevitable impacts that this scenario will bring. Working with communities to design-in resilience has to start now – space for nature, housing and

infrastructure, cleaner transport and energy, health and social care and of course food systems. It is through this real, practical, context and place-specific work that the realities and possibilities for tackling the climate crisis, the nature crisis, and the health crisis simultaneously really come to life.

To be clear, this isn't to give us reasons not to act now to meet the Paris targets; rather, when we acknowledge and start to work towards the implications of *not* meeting them, the incentives for taking meaningful actions *right now* are stronger. As we've started to see clearly in the last couple of years, more diverse and flexible systems are more resilient systems – from farms, to households, to communities, to businesses, to whole sectors.

And, to borrow a phrase adopted by a bold new innovator in farming, Andy Cato of Groove Armada, if we can fix food, we can fix the planet.